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ABSTRACT

A short synopsis of five regional meetings on school choice and follow-up activities is offered in this report. The meetings were held in fall 1989 in East Harlem, New York; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; Charlotte, North Carolina; Denver, Colorado; and Richmond, California. Three sections of the report provide a review of choice activities that have occurred since the meetings, a description of types of school choice, and a discussion of school choice and restructuring. A fourth section examines issues relevant to school choice, such as increasing the scope of choice, maintaining a racial balance, and providing equal access to transportation and information. The final section describes Department of Education school choice projects. (LMI)

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U.S. Department of Education
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CHOOSING BETTER SCHOOLS

The Five Regional Meetings On Choice in Education

U.S. Department of Education
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Foreword

Recently I was asked whether I expected American students to achieve the education goals set by the President and our nation's governors by the year 2000. The answer I gave to this question was both yes and no. Yes, I certainly believe that our students are capable of performing up to and beyond these nationally designated standards. But only if we have the courage to make significant changes in the way we educate our children.

At present, large, cumbersome bureaucracies absorb the major part of our education resources, while students and teachers in the classroom are forced to function on what little remains. Curriculum and methods are controlled by these same distant bureaucracies, leaving parents and teachers with virtually no voice in their children's academic future. Parents must be free to select the appropriate learning environment for their children. Teachers must have the flexibility to design schools to best serve the needs of students and families. Greater flexibility and choice generates excellence, promotes creativity and assures accountability in our schools.

I have already taken a number of important steps to encourage the progress of school restructuring efforts across the country. The Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs (OIIA) has been assigned the lead responsibility for the Department of Education's information and outreach activities on school choice and site-based management. The administrators of OIIA have a broad mandate to represent my office in encouraging and facilitating school improvement through these empowerment initiatives.

OIIA has been directed to:

- Establish a unit, the Center for Choice in Education, to head the Department's outreach efforts for school choice and site-based management.
- Set up a "choice hot-line," a toll-free 800 number to provide information on choice in education (1-800-442-PICK).
- Assemble a resource bank to be available for information, consultation and advice to educators, policy makers and others interested in establishing choice programs.
- Consult with urban leaders about how choice can be used to address problems of education in the inner city.
- Conduct "how-to" workshops for administrators, school board members, teachers, legislators, parents and others.

The way to meet our educational goals by the turn of the century is to empower those who know what is best for children — their parents and teachers. Local control and management of schools is essential if we are to provide quality education to our families. School-based management allows entrepreneurs at the level of the individual school the flexibility to restructure schools, and provide alternative academic programs to parents and students. School choice guarantees accountability, as parents and students select from among these alternatives the educational program which best meets their needs. These initiatives together afford parents, especially low-income parents, a voice in the education of their children. Only then can we be sure that the role of the family in education is not diminished.

The five regional strategy meetings on educational choice, which I convened in the fall of 1989, brought together many who are currently administering, or are considering, school choice and school-based management programs. The participants represented a broad cross-section of U.S. educators and policy makers. The meetings gave public hearing to educational empowerment success stories and allowed individuals to voice their support and concerns about this issue. What follows in this report is a short synopsis of those meetings, with an emphasis on the dialogue of the students, parents, educators, policy makers and elected officials who participated. Since the regional meetings, the Department of Education has continued to encourage states to enact legislation allowing for more local control and greater parental participation.

Lauro F. Cavazos
Secretary of Education

THE FIVE REGIONAL STRATEGY MEETINGS ON CHOICE IN EDUCATION

> *Many of the families that we worked with at the mini-school had limited choices in their lives, whether it be jobs, or housing, or their way of living. Then there was a system, a school, that was offering them a choice in their child's education. Now they had control over an area of their lives that was very important to them, their children. Now they felt that if they didn't get a proper education, at least their children would. We offered them a ray of hope, a sparkle in their lives. We empowered these parents because we gave them a choice.*
>
> *Migdalia Maldonado*
> *Principal PS 108*
> *Community School District 4*
> *New York, New York*

In the fall of 1989, Secretary Lauro Cavazos convened five regional meetings to encourage support for school choice at the state and local levels. The meetings were held in East Harlem, New York; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; Charlotte, North Carolina; Denver, Colorado; and Richmond, California. In the words of the Secretary:

> *School choice and school-based management offer opportunities to inject vitality into the education system. These programs encourage teachers and principals to become innovators and to structure curriculum to meet high academic standards. They also involve parents in the school and encourage students to become learners.*

The meetings provided a forum for the Secretary to hear from students, parents, teachers, administrators and policy makers about school choice. Participants came from almost every area of the country and included governors, U.S. congressmen, state legislators, school administrators, teachers, individuals from the private sector, community activists, parents and students. They brought to the meetings knowledge of a variety of choice initiatives and plans.

The practice of allowing parents and students to select a school was widely supported among attendees, although some participants voiced reservations about certain aspects of the choice program. Some people expressed the concern that little is known about how effective choice systems are structured and cautioned that families with few resources might not have equal access to the best schools if choice is not implemented correctly. Others thought that the school choice programs most often considered by states and localities do not go far enough in providing options to parents. These supporters of more extensive choice argued that real competition between schools can only occur if private schools and home schools are included in school choice plans.

Many participants noted that the competition choice provides promotes improved schools and student performance. According to Jerry Hume, Chairman of the Board of Basic American Foods:

> *The most promising approaches to school reform are those that promote competition between schools and that come from providing parents a choice among schools. Business exists in an environment where it is subject to the marketplace on a daily basis. We know that it is much less expensive to make a product right the first time than to repair a failed product after a problem is detected.*

David T. Kearns, Chairman and CEO of the Xerox Corporation, had this to say:

> *The hard truth is that today's public schools are by and large monopoly providers. They are not subject to the pressures of consumers. In the case of schools, there are numerous small monopolies called school districts. If you're smart and well-off, you can choose a good monopoly and avoid a bad one. You buy into a "good" neighborhood or pay tuition at a private school. It's no surprise that the poor do not attend the good schools.*

The proponents of school choice spoke of the renewed sense of community and vitality infused in the school after allowing families choice. According to Jeanne Allen of the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.:

> *Choice is to educators what competition is to business. It unleashes the pent-up creativity of educators in response to consumer demands. Choice is the catalyst that drives other school reforms — it sparks innovation in teaching, management and learning.*

CHOICE ACTIVITIES AFTER THE MEETINGS

There has been much activity in the states since the regional meetings on educational choice were convened, demonstrating the amount of support for the choice initiative throughout the country. According to Joe Nathan, a leading scholar of school choice and participant at the regional meetings:

> *Today, most people support the idea of choice among public schools. In response to new coalitions of private and public sector advocates, more than 20 states have taken steps to implement some type of choice in their public school systems. Allowing families and educators to select among various public schools can have a rapid, dramatic, positive effect. As educators, parents and, most important, students, have testified, being allowed to select among public schools has changed lives.*

Through the initiative of Wisconsin State Representative Polly Williams, a speaker at the regional meetings, and with the active support of Governor Tommy Thompson, a keynote speaker, Milwaukee has begun the country's first school voucher program for low-income students to attend private, nonsectarian schools at state expense. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program enables up to 1,000 low-income families in Milwaukee to send their children to private, nonsectarian schools, with the state paying $2,500 for each child. President Bush has praised State Representative Polly Williams and Governor Tommy Thompson for the plan and described it as "one of the most interesting experiments in education reform."

Colorado has enacted legislation requiring districts to permit parents to choose from public schools within the district. The law in Colorado also authorizes a pilot test for interdistrict choice. Under the stipulations of this plan, three districts will receive a total of $775,000 to experiment with interdistrict open enrollment.

Kentucky passed a school reform law that allows parents to transfer their children to another public school if the school they are attending does not meet the legislature's new education guidelines. This program takes effect in 1996.

Washington State, Idaho and Utah followed a path forged earlier by Minnesota, Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Ohio when they enacted legislation that allows for greater choice among public schools across school district lines. Washington State's legislation gives students who wish to transfer to another district the right to do so if the new school is more accessible to a parent's workplace or child care, and if the student has "a special hardship or detrimental condition." In other cases, parents have to show a financial, educational, safety or health condition that will be "reasonably improved" by the transfer to another district, and districts accepting transfer students may charge a "transfer fee." It also allows high school juniors and seniors to take college courses.

Utah's and Idaho's "enrollment options" choice bills allow a student to attend a public school outside the district where the student resides. The resident district cannot prevent a student from leaving, but receiving districts can

decide not to accept students. In Utah, state funding follows the student, and the resident district pays one-half the per-student expenditure that exceeds the state contribution.

Through the efforts of State Senator John McClaughry, a speaker at the regional meetings, Vermont enacted a law allowing towns that do not have schools for grades 1-6 to pay tuition to private, secular elementary schools. Since 1869, Vermont has permitted towns without their own public high schools to pay tuition for students in grades 7-12 in any public or approved private school, even those outside the state. About 22 percent of the state's high school students are eligible.

California teachers proposed permitting parents and public school teachers to set up new public schools. If the plan for the "charter school" meets state academic and civil rights guidelines, and parents of 30 students agree to participate, state funds would follow the students. This plan is being considered by the California legislature.

In Oregon, Oregonians for Educational Choice have succeeded in gathering enough signatures to place an initiative for a state constitutional amendment on the ballot in November. The initiative provides for public school open enrollment and for tuition tax credits for private school students. The tuition tax credit amount is $2,500 per student, K-12, with refundable credits that allow low-income families to use the plan, and the plan allows the legislature to set higher credit amounts for handicapped students or others with special needs. The plan states that a district will save $5,000 when a student leaves; the district must give $3,000 to the state and may keep the rest.

In Louisiana, prominent business leaders, including Jackie Ducote, another speaker from the regional meetings, have formed a Right to Learn Committee to support vouchers for use in private schools. Right to Learn legislation has been introduced in the state House to provide K-3 students who choose to attend private schools with $1,500 in vouchers.

Many states with choice initiatives in place are now targeting special needs children with programs that would give them greater access to a larger number of schools. Nebraska, for instance, passed legislation that obligates the state to pay 90 percent of the transportation costs for low-income and special needs children to attend the public school of their choice. This makes acceptance of these students more attractive to the receiving district.

Beyond state initiatives, other individuals and groups have gone far to explore and promote the choice initiative since the meetings. John Chubb and Terry Moe, a speaker at the Richmond, California, meeting published *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* with the Brookings Institution. This book, based on a survey of 20,000 principals, teachers and students at 500 public high schools, proposes that the current educational system be replaced by "an entirely new system of public education based on free enterprise, in which schools compete for students in the open market by providing genuine educational choices for parents and children." Chubb and Moe argue that "choice represents the kind of fundamental restructuring that will be necessary if the nation's objectives are to be realized."

In Detroit, Michigan, Lawrence Patrick, President of the Detroit School Board and a speaker at the regional meetings, encouraged reform measures for his urban district that incorporate school-based management and school choice

programs. In Chicago, the City Club has created a division to support a national coalition called TEACH America (Taxpayers for Educational Accountability and Choice), which will encourage greater choice in Chicago and across the country.

TYPES OF SCHOOL CHOICE

Participants at the regional meetings discussed different types of educational choice, including magnet schools, intra- and interdistrict choice, postsecondary options, second-chance programs for dropouts and at-risk students, tuition tax credits, vouchers and home schooling. It was clear from the discussion that the kinds of educational choice available are as numerous as the communities that have implemented this reform.

Magnet Schools

The original intention for creating most magnet school programs was to integrate schools by attracting students from a variety of social, economic and racial backgrounds into the same school. Increasingly, however, magnet schools showed that they had academic benefits as well. Early research found that the magnets most successful at desegregating schools were those that were located in urban areas with high minority concentrations, but were able to draw students from suburban school systems. These magnet schools often distinguished themselves from local public schools by promoting special themes, such as the arts, mathematics and science, or offering unique programs. Students were also attracted to the schools because of strong academic reputations. In many areas of the country, there are long waiting lists of students who wish to attend a local magnet school.

One such magnet school was visited by Secretary Cavazos during the regional meeting in Denver, Colorado. Ted Brucker and Ed Hoing, the codirectors and founders of the program, had this to say about their school:

> *The Denver Public School's Computer Magnet Program is recognized as one of the best and most comprehensive high school computer programs in the country. In each of the four years the program has been in existence, twice as many students applied as were accepted. Over 60 percent of the Computer Magnet students are minorities, and 50 percent of the students are girls. The Computer Magnet Program seeks a wide range of students, from the gifted and talented to special education. As the program looks toward its fifth year of operation, it is developing a track record for student achievement. From National Merit finalists to potential dropouts becoming regular attenders, the Computer Magnet Program is showing that schools can make a difference. We are excited about the continuing growth of the program and the impact it is having on the lives of our students.*

Intradistrict Choice

Intradistrict choice allows parents to select schools throughout the district where they live. Many of the teachers attending the meetings participated in intradistrict choice and expressed their enthusiasm for the program. Many of these teachers spoke of their involvement in designing the school day and curriculum, which they believed enhanced their experience and that of their students. One teacher, Norma Thinger, from the Sheldon Classical Studies School in Richmond, California, explained her experience this way:

> *I felt so stimulated by the curriculum writing process. It was done in such a professional way, and we were respected for our knowledge and dedication. As I looked at the courses which had been developed, I couldn't help but think that if I were a child I would want to take every one of these electives.*

Some districts under requirement by the courts to enforce strict racial balance guidelines separate districts into zones of choice. This model is often referred to as "controlled choice." Another variant of intradistrict choice creates variety within a district by developing schools-within-schools. School choice in East Harlem is one such intradistrict choice program.

Interdistrict Choice

Interdistrict choice plans allow families to send their children to public schools in areas outside their resident districts. The choice plan in Minnesota is the pioneer of interdistrict choice in the United States. In Minnesota, any family may apply to send a school-aged child to a district other than their resident district. Access to schools outside the family's resident district in Minnesota is limited only by space and adherence to state desegregation guidelines. In Minnesota's choice plan and other similar interdistrict choice plans, state education dollars follow the child to whatever school is selected by the family. Several other states have adopted, partially or in full, the Minnesota interdistrict choice model. Iowa, Arkansas, Nebraska, Ohio, Idaho and Utah have already proposed and passed interdistrict choice legislation. Washington State and Colorado have passed laws allowing for more limited interdistrict choice.

Postsecondary Options

Postsecondary option plans allow high school juniors and seniors to take courses in colleges and universities. They earn high school or college credits for taking courses in community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, or vocational-technical institutes. When students apply and are accepted into the college program, they may decide to attend the postsecondary school on a full-time basis or split their time between the high school and postsecondary school. Students who enroll in the postsecondary programs remain eligible for all activities associated with their high school; many students return to the high school to participate in such activities at the close of the school day. Funding is usually split between a student's home school and the postsecondary institution based on how many courses the student takes in each institution.

In 1985 in Minnesota, every upper-division high schooler was awarded the opportunity of going to college, full- or part-time at state expense. In 1987, two years after the program was in effect, more than 4,000 students had opted to enroll in the postsecondary plan. Ninety percent of those enrolled in the Minnesota Postsecondary Options Program said that they learned more in college than they had in high school, and 95 percent expressed satisfaction with the general program. According to Donald Anderson, Superintendent of Independent School District 740 in Melrose, Minnesota:

> *We are in our fourth year of the postsecondary, on-site choice program. Thirty to 35 percent of our juniors and seniors take college level courses. Ninety-five percent of the class of 1988 endorsed the program in a follow-up study. The word we get from parents, students and teachers is overwhelmingly supportive. Our students do well in further college work. We think more of our students are opting for college as a result of the start they get in our program. The key is that we know we are providing a quality experience.*

If courses are taken for high school credit, the state of Minnesota pays for the tuition, the required textbooks and fees and assists with transportation costs according to need based on the family's income. It is up to the high school how much credit is awarded for a particular course. Receiving postsecondary credit for the courses after graduation from high school is also possible if the student enrolls in the same postsecondary institution or if the new postsecondary school agrees to award full or partial credit.

Second-Chance Programs

Some school choice plans are targeted to at-risk students and dropouts. In Minnesota, for example, Area Learning Centers and High School Graduation Incentive Programs permit students who have not succeeded in their resident school to select public schools outside their district, providing there is room and racial balance guidelines are maintained. Students with low test scores or grades, chemical dependencies, excessive truancy or expulsion are eligible to participate in the program. Over 50 percent of the High School Graduation Incentive students in Minnesota are former dropouts. Wendy Keller, a 19-year-old student, enrolled in an Area Learning Center in St. Cloud, Minnesota, spoke of her experience this way:

> *The reason I chose the Area Learning Center is simple. I was about to become a mother at the age of sixteen, and I didn't want to drop out of school. I believe that people who go to the Area Learning Center really want to learn but just don't work well in the mainstream system. When you come to the Area Learning Center you can also go to a technical school as a post-secondary student. This helps to get a head start on your career while you are still in high school. The Area Learning Center also offers day care for the children for currently enrolled students. The Center also offers a Teenage Parenting Program to teach you about yourself and how to help the child you are carrying.*

Tuition Tax Credits and Vouchers

Tuition tax credits and vouchers allow parents to use education dollars at private schools. In tuition tax credit plans, parents can deduct education expenses from their income taxes. In a voucher system, the state government provides education funds directly to families in the form of a voucher, and the family then can use the voucher in a public or private school of its choosing. Parents, not the state, decide how education dollars are spent.

Home Schooling

Home schooling is an increasingly popular alternative to public schools, and a significant number of home school proponents attended the regional meetings. The supporters of the home schooling alternative pointed out that parents that teach their children at home can devote more time to them, and that many children educated at home do well academically as compared to children educated in traditional schools. Home schooling supporters also argued that home schooling provides an important option to parents in a school choice system and that such programs should be included in choice plans.

SCHOOL CHOICE AND RESTRUCTURING

According to many of the participants at the meetings, school choice can be combined with other initiatives to provide a more effective formula for reform. According to Congressman Steve Bartlett (R-TX), Chairman of the Empowerment Task Force of the House Republican Research Committee, U.S. House of Representatives:

> *There are different models of choice throughout the country. There are diverse schools in some communities, and in others there is intradistrict choice and interdistrict choice. But all models that are successful have two ingredients: first, the parents are empowered to make choices for the education of their children; and second, the schools themselves, teachers and principals, are empowered to decentralize and to provide a competitive marketplace for those schools. So each school can offer a unique educational opportunity to all of its students and that will encourage those students to come to school. Every school of choice must incorporate two ingredients: first, the parents must be empowered; and second, the teachers and principals must be empowered.*

School-Based Management

Participants at the regional meetings argued that effective school choice plans required the provision of as many options as possible to students and parents. Many also noted that parents must be involved in the school decisionmaking process if significant change is to occur in the way children are educated. School-based management, in combination with choice, can improve schools by allowing for enough flexibility to create diversity among schools and by increasing the role of parents in important decisions regarding their child's education.

In general, school-based management is a system where educational authority and accountability are transferred to the school building level from the state and district. School-based management plans differ in who is assigned ultimate decisionmaking responsibility, whether it be the school principal, a committee of teachers and parents or a group with members from the school and community. Congressman Mickey Edwards (R-OK), U.S. House of Representatives, explained the idea this way:

> *Effective schools have clear goals, effective leadership and the capacity to make educational decisions. Some call it decentralization, some call it school autonomy, some call it site-based management, but it reflects a growing trend and a companion to choice. More individual school autonomy recognizes that diverse schools, competing for students, can best provide both innovation and accountability. Parents, students, teachers and principals have the most at stake in the success of the education enterprise. Affording teachers and principals the opportunity to develop their own schools, allowing parents the opportunity to choose among these schools the one best suited to their children provides a way to increase the professional satisfaction of teachers and improve education*

The value of school-based management programs for choice in education is the flexibility they promote in the design and management of the learning environment. When parents are searching for the best educational setting for their children, options exist under school-based management plans. Parents can also shape the school and its program and monitor the impact of the program on their children. As Sy Fliegel, former Deputy Superintendent of District 4 in East Harlem, New York, noted at the meetings:

> *On-site management empowers educational professionals, administrators and teachers with the flexibility to design and run productive schools. School choice makes those professionals accountable—to parents, students and the community.*

Parental Involvement

Many participants at the meetings noted that school choice programs work most effectively when parents are involved in the educational process. Families were identified by many meeting participants as central to school success. Ted Sanders, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Education, noted the special importance of the family to a child's future this way:

> *While many have focused almost exclusively on the enormous task facing our public school system, we must focus more attention on the attitudes and activities of parents. After all, education begins at home. Indeed, many researchers now believe that the most reliable predictor of academic success is not economic or social background but the degree to which a child's parents value learning. For children develop their attitudes about school long before they set foot in a classroom—usually from parents and, for the most part, by example.*

Parents with access to the decision-making units in the school can help formulate the best education program for their children. Such access instills in parents a greater feeling of ownership over the school and a greater commitment to the school. It also allows parents a voice if they are not satisfied with the way the process is working. Jan Metler, a parent in the Richmond, California, school district expressed it this way:

> *I come from a different point of view than most of you, because I am a parent. Parents need to feel that they have an avenue for discussion if they find a part of the program that they really don't like. I believe this is a very important part of the process. The attitude of our district office is one of flexibility. That means that if any of these programs isn't addressing the needs of my child, I can walk into the school and ask to have things changed. I can honestly say that this program has been wonderful for our district.*

Parental involvement through the selection of schools also provides school choice programs with a mechanism of accountability. Parents can essentially vote with their feet if they are not satisfied with the educational product of the school. Schools will have a greater incentive to improve if the neighborhood school no longer holds a monopoly on parental choices. Jackie Ducote of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, expressed it this way:

America's only hope is to change the rules of the game and rethink our definition of public education. We must stop thinking in terms of public versus private schools and start talking about empowering parents to send their children to effective schools that can and will educate them, revamp the delivery of public education and give parents real power to make it work, and put an external force to work that is free from the control of those who have been in charge of our failed education system in the past. That external force is competition. The only way to get true competition is to give parents the power to choose the best school for their child—not just the best school the government has to offer.

Many of the meeting participants agreed that parental involvement in education promotes academic excellence in children. Many attendees involved in school choice programs noted that when afforded the ability to participate in their children's school day, parents become increasingly active. Parents attending the regional meetings expressed interest in being directly involved in their children's education. According to Mr. and Mrs. Dave Badger, parents of a student in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, North Carolina:

As parents, we want to be accepted as our child's best advocate. We want to be consulted and respected for our unique knowledge of him. We also want to be active participants in his education and in the activities offered at his school.

Another parent, Robert DeLeon from East Harlem, New York, reported on the positive results of parental involvement:

It has been my experience, and those of other parents who have children in District 4 schools, that the collective energies that come together and make the school move forward from one point to another is so powerful that all sorts of exciting things happen. By involving parents, there is no predicting what resources will be brought into the school. Schools should continue to use these resources. It gives parents a sense that they are part of what is happening in the school. It gives parents a sense of ownership over the school program.

Many other meeting participants recounted from experience the benefits of active parental involvement in the education of their children. They advocated programs that combined school choice with effective outreach efforts that continued to involve parents even beyond the selection of a school. Principal Stephanie Counts of the Piedmont Open School in Charlotte, North Carolina, identified parents as critical to the success of her school in this way:

Parents play an equal role in planning school improvements. They are involved in setting goals and in the implementation and evaluation of those goals. You can walk into a classroom, the media center, playground, cafeteria, and you really can't tell the difference between the teachers and the parents. They are out there working together, they are pulling together. These are the things that make the school so special. It is a feeling, a warmth, that can't be calculated. That is what you feel when you see parents, students, and teachers in the school working

hand in hand. That is really the key element that makes all this work—whatever you want to call it. It has to do with parents making decisions, being involved in their children's education, supporting the school and the staff.

Parents of minority children attending the meetings argued that school choice programs encouraged them, often for the first time, to become involved in the education of their children. According to Pearl Holder, Director of the Gifted and Talented School in East Harlem, New York:

> *Minority parents especially know that education is the key to the future for our children. If the school can give the parent what they need for their children, hope in that future doesn't fail. Each and every day parents are in the school trying to nurture hope in their children. The critical thing is nurturing that gifted behavior in children, then they can reach any goal.*

Parental involvement programs and school choice also empower low-income parents to make crucial decisions regarding the future of their children. Many at the meetings argued that parental choice promoted a parental voice and extended to parents leverage in a system not traditionally responsive to their needs. Wisconsin State Representative Polly Williams presented the position of low-income families this way:

> *School choice empowers low-income families. People with money have always controlled what happens to their children. They can purchase the best schools by selecting the right neighborhood. They can send their children to private schools. People with money can shop around. Other people respect money and what it can do. Parents with money can use it as a leverage in decision making. Low-income families are stuck in a nonresponsive system.*

As Congressman Bartlett noted:

> *Choice is not a program for just one income stratum. Choice, or open enrollment, or parental empowerment works for all income levels, because all parents are the same— their number one mission in life is to improve the education of their children at whatever educational level.*

SCHOOL CHOICE: TOPICS OF CONCERN

Meeting participants noted some areas where policy makers and practitioners should be especially sensitive when considering school choice programs. For example, some concurred that successful and equitable school choice plans make available as much information as possible on the schools in the program to families; include private schools as an option to parents; provide for racial balance in the schools; are sensitive to the needs of minority students; and include plans and dollars for transportation, whenever necessary, to provide access to schools of choice for all students. According to Joe Nathan:

> *Scholars have determined that school choice is a powerful reform tool. Although no one best approach exists for all states, recognition is growing that all choice programs should include certain critical elements such as parent information, nondiscriminatory admissions policies and opportunity for educators to create distinctive programs. Failure to include these elements can increase rather than decrease the gaps in achievement and opportunity between affluent and low-income people.*

Information

Parents who are making decisions about the future of their children must have quality information about the options available to them. Information is critical to the effective functioning of a school choice program. Providing information on the school program to parents is often all that is necessary to motivate a seemingly inactive parent to assume greater responsibility in their child's education.

Student and parent satisfaction with the academic program selected depends on the quality of the information they receive prior to the choice. Counselors and teachers play a critical role in assisting families select a school or academic program. In most cases, counselors, teachers, parents and students select a school after carefully weighing the needs of the student and the identity, atmosphere and record of the schools under consideration.

In Massachusetts cities with controlled choice programs, parent information centers have been established to provide families with crucial information regarding the schools in the choice system. These information centers are equipped with a variety of publications on what the choice schools offer and how to apply to a particular program. The centers are also staffed by trained personnel, often other parents, and are open in the evening to accommodate parents who work during the day. In those communities where the need exists, bilingual staffers are employed to assist non-English-speaking parents. According to Richard Hoffman, the desegregation coordinator in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the centers provide the following services to parents:

> *Everyone goes to the same site to register their children. At the center, there are native speakers from Southeast Asia and Spanish speaking adults to assist parents. We also provide for other languages as they are needed. Right now, at the same site, we also do our language screening to determine whether the new students need bilingual education, and if they can perform regular class work in English. Our transportation center is also located right at this center. We have added a resource and information desk at the parent information center,*

so that parents can find out other information about the community. Because we are usually the first place parents come to when they move to the city of Lawrence, we have asked some of the social service agencies to provide us with print material and an occasional staff person, so that they can describe what social services are available in the community.

According to many of the educators at the meetings, effective information centers, such as those in Massachusetts, also encourage students and their families to visit the schools in the choice system to evaluate how well the school climate matches their needs. On these visits, parents and students meet school staff, sit in on classes and examine first hand the school facilities. This early interaction between the family and school personnel builds a bond and a sense of community among parents, students and teachers. Educators agree that this bond, although difficult to measure statistically, is often a crucial component of learning success.

Parent conferences with teachers and students are most important when students do not receive their initial school selection. In the East Harlem program and other programs like it, parents can meet with school administrators to discuss alternative options for their children. John Falco, Deputy Superintendent of Community School District 4 in East Harlem, New York, explained how the process works in his district:

We have about 65 percent of our youngsters who will get their first choice. About 30 percent of our youngsters will get into their second choice. The remaining 5 percent and their parents then meet with my assistants and myself individually, and we make an assignment decision about the youngster based on his needs and interests. We believe it is important to work individually with the youngsters and their parents to make the choice that best suits the student. Come September and October, if there are still some parents and students that feel that they have not made a wise choice, we sit down with these families again and make the necessary changes. Our office works very closely with the students and their parents, so that by October every family has made a choice that they are comfortable and satisfied with and which will definitely meet their educational, social and cultural needs.

Increasing the Scope of Choice

A significant number of meeting participants believed that restricting choice to public schools would not provide enough competition to improve schools. In order for competition to be real and effective, parents must be provided with as many options as possible. Further, it was argued, choice must include schools that are already achieving academic excellence. Maximum accountability for public schools will only exist if parents are offered the most complete set of acceptable school options, which would include private schools. According to Sister Catherine McNamee, President of the National Catholic Educational Association and a participant in the meetings:

U.S. Catholic educators vote "yes" on the issue of parental choice in education. We believe it is the fundamental right of parents to educate their children and affirm that educational choice is the best remedy for educational reform in this country. As a matter of justice, parental choice must include both public and nonpublic schools. The Bush administration and governors of every state must consider how our public policies can help all

parents provide the best possible education for their children. Such policies will not pose a threat to public education; rather, they will serve as a stimulus for continuing improvement. The competitive spirit of an open marketplace engenders excellence and initiative. This concept embodies a basic American tenet. It is key to achieving the national education goals set forth by U.S. leaders.

Maintaining Racial Balance

Educational choice systems, particularly those designed to promote the integration of state or district schools, restrict student movement when the maintenance of racial balance is threatened. Minnesota's law provides, for instance, that "...notwithstanding any provision to the contrary, students may not enroll in a nonresident district under this section if their enrollment in another school district would result in a violation of a district's desegregation plan, as mandated and approved by the state board of education." Similarly, in Nebraska, the state statute reads:

> *A school district that has a desegregation plan adopted by the school board or the board of education or ordered by the federal court may limit the number of students who transfer into or out of the school district. The school board or board of education of such school district shall adopt specific standards for acceptance and rejection of applications for transfer into or out of such district. Standards shall be designed to facilitate the school district's desegregation plan and maintain or improve the integration of the school district.*

Congressman Edwards noted that:

> *One of the concerns raised by those who oppose choice is the fear of resegregation. But the facts just don't support that fear. Five states—Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota and Ohio—have recently passed statewide open enrollment legislation. In every case, there are safeguards written into the law to protect against segregation. In school districts around the country—San Diego; Prince George's County, Maryland; Dade County, Florida; Cincinnati; Buffalo; Milwaukee; to name a few—choice is used as a tool to achieve desegregation. Many states now have equal educational opportunity requirements and enforcement mechanisms, and, under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, every school district that receives federal funds must meet federal nondiscrimination requirements. So, while the fear of resegregation resulting from choice should not go unacknowledged, it is clear that it is being addressed, with mechanisms at the state and federal level to assure that parents and students are protected and have avenues for redress.*

Many participants noted that the current education system already segregates families by income. Affluent families can afford to select schools by selecting neighborhoods and purchasing homes in those districts with high quality schools. They can also send their children to private schools to escape an inferior education at their neighborhood school. Low-income families do not share access to these alternatives, and are often left in unsafe schools with drug problems and chronically low achievement scores. School choice gives low-income families greater opportunities to attend safe, quality schools.

Choice and Minorities

A major area of concern for meeting participants involved the support for school choice among minority families and the impact of choice on the performance of minority students. Many of those involved in school choice programs noted the support of the choice option among minority families. Some participants, like Wisconsin State Representative Polly Williams, author of the Parental Choice legislation for low-income students in Milwaukee, argued that school choice programs are particularly valuable for minority, as well as low-income families. According to Representative Williams, school choice provides these families with options that are now available to more affluent, or nonminority families. Other practitioners, from East Harlem District 4 in New York City to the Richmond Unified School District in Richmond, California, noted the support among minority families in their district for the school choice program. According to many participants, support for school choice is growing in the minority population. The 1990 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallop Poll survey of the public's attitudes on school choice reinforces this perspective. Results showed that among minorities, support of public school choice is at an all time high of 72 percent, compared with 62 percent of the public overall and 60 percent of whites.

Practitioners from districts with heavy minority or low-income student populations pointed to the positive effect choice has had on the academic performance of students in their districts. According to Mary Romer, Assistant Director for Alternative Schools in East Harlem's District 4 in New York:

> *Where I come from professionally is an area called East Harlem. You can name just about any factor that would make a school fail and it exists in East Harlem. East Harlem is a very small urban area, with a predominant minority population. When I hear people say that school choice does not work for minority students and that minority parents are not equipped to make important educational decisions regarding their children, I think of East Harlem where choice is offered to minority families in a quality format and on a quality basis. Fifteen years ago we were failing as a school district, but we had a vision in East Harlem. We have risen from dead last in the city of New York, and we continue to improve.*

Some attendees of the meeting cautioned that school choice opportunities must be available to all students if choice is to stimulate schools to improve. Suzanne Davenport, a participant in the meetings, together with Donald Moore, in a study done for Designs for Change in Chicago, warned that school choice may isolate low-achieving students, leaving them in the poorer quality schools. Participants from East Harlem, Minnesota, Richmond and many other localities described how their programs were designed to provide opportunities to all students. There was general agreement that, to avoid the problem of isolating or sorting, students choice programs must be carefully designed. Participants recounted from their own experience how opportunities for students increased as the number of options available to them also increased. According to practitioners, in the absence of universal choice, rationing student assignment is required, despite attendance inequities.

Secretary Cavazos and other proponents of choice expressed their concern that the current system is unfair to many students and that choice would provide access to quality schools and exit from failing schools. They stated that they would not support any system that condemned some students to an inferior education. Indeed, they saw choice as an alternative to the current system, where children whose parents are affluent enough to buy into the right neighborhood attend quality schools, while poor children are

left in inferior schools. In their view, choice programs level the playing field.

Proponents of choice encouraged all schools to improve and argued that if a school was not providing a quality education to its students, choice would force the school to improve or shut down. Providing quality education in all schools increases the opportunities for low-income and minority children. It is these children who are hurt the most by the current failure of the public school system.

Providing Access: Transportation

Participants of the meetings spoke of the desirability of providing transportation to all students, especially for low-income students who would not otherwise be able to participate in a choice program. Transportation can be costly, although in some areas where public transportation is readily available, this is not so much of a problem.

School choice in East Harlem's District 4 has not involved great cost to the district for reasons that are shared by many urban school districts. The East Harlem school district covers a relatively small geographic area, while serving a large population. District 4 has also made effective use of the school-within-a-school model of choice to limit the distance students must travel to school, while still providing many different learning options. School children in East Harlem also continue to depend on the public transportation system, as they had before the implementation of school choice programs.

Other school systems have addressed the transportation question somewhat differently. In the Richmond Unified School District in Richmond, California, Superintendent Walter Marks designed a transportation system to meet his own community's needs. He explained the process this way:

> *Prior to the implementation of the school choice system in the Richmond Unified School District, transportation was not provided to students, except for special education children and for reasons of safety. The transportation plan in Richmond is designed to provide transportation to any sixth- through twelfth-grade students to their school of choice outside their assigned attendance area. The plan at the elementary level does not provide for transportation. It is designed so that parents could choose three to four models of education within walking distance of their home, that is within three to four mile planning zones within two miles of their home. It is our objective to provide transportation at the elementary level by September of 1991.*

Under the open enrollment plans in Arkansas, Iowa and Minnesota, parents bring their children to the boundary of the nonresident district, and the nonresident district is responsible for transporting the students from the boundary of the district to the school. The state provides funds to reimburse low-income parents for the cost of taking students to the border of the nonresident district. According to Ruth Randall, former Commissioner of Education for Minnesota:

> *The problem of transporting students to the school of their choice presented special challenges in a rural state like Minnesota. A system was worked out where parents have the responsibility of transporting their children to the boundary of the resident district, and the nonresident district assumes the*

responsibility of bringing students from that point to the selected school building. The nonresident district is also free to draw on state funds to reimburse low-income parents for transportation costs to the nonresident boundary.

In the Open Enrollment Plan in Minnesota, the legislature allocated additional money for transportation. If low-income parents ask for transportation, they can get it at state expense. Other students in the Open Enrollment Plan must get to the receiving district and that district must provide transportation to the school of choice.

In cities like St. Louis, Missouri, where school choice has been implemented to comply with a court-approved desegregation order, complete transportation services are provided to all participating students.

There is no doubt that for many communities transportation costs can prove expensive. It is also true that a school choice system, particularly one that crosses district lines, can eliminate or redirect some transportation costs. In many rural and suburban districts, the way school district boundary lines are drawn forces students to attend a school that may not be the closest to their home. Transportation costs are reduced if the student can attend the closer school.

But it is up to the district to make the decision on how to balance cost with the provision of the greatest number of opportunities to students. Participants at the meetings were reluctant to prescribe transportation plans universally, for as was often noted, one district's plan probably would not work in another area.

What the meetings showed was that, if designed properly, school choice plans offer equal benefits to all students. The challenge for school administrators and community leaders is to develop choice plans that are sensitive to the special needs of the resident district. Developing a plan for transporting students to the school their family has selected is a good example of how important it is to remain in touch with the particular needs of the resident district.

SCHOOL CHOICE ACTIVITIES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Department of Education is involved with a number of projects that will add to the information already available on school choice. Currently, the Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation is conducting an evaluation of the school choice plan in Minnesota. An evaluation of federally and nonfederally supported magnet schools throughout the United States began in October of 1990. At the request of Governor Tommy Thompson, the Department will be conducting an evaluation of the Parental Choice Program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Department has also released the following publications on the school choice issue: *Choice of Schools in Six Nations*; *Choosing a School for Your Child*; and *Improving Schools and Empowering Parents*, a report based on the White House conference on school choice. The Department has also prepared a Spanish version of *Choosing a School for Your Child*. The Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement has sponsored a series of roundtable discussions on implementing public school choice and is preparing a detailed guide for practitioners involved with, or considering, designing a system of school choice.

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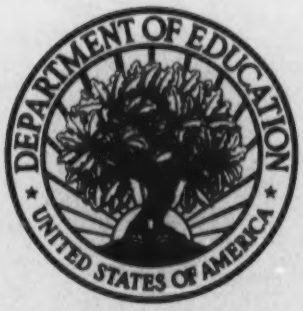
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